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ABSTRACT

A case study compared United States and South Korean press coverage of the crash of the November 29, 1987, Korean Air Lines (KAL) flight 858, to examine how the press reported the terrorism angle before evidence supporting the charges of terrorism was uncovered. Stories dealing with the crash reported in four prestigious United States newspapers and two leading South Korean newspapers from November 30 to December 3, 1987, were analyzed. Analysis focused on whether references were made to the terrorism angle. Results (1) did not suggest evidence that the press plays up or sensationalizes terrorist events; (2) showed that neither the South Korean nor the United States press gave much coverage to the terrorist angle until a major event was uncovered suggesting North Korean involvement; (3) suggest that public officials exercised at least a degree of "agenda control"; and (4) suggest that mere allegations or rumors of terrorism alone will not lead the press to report about terrorism in great detail and that some evidence is needed before the press focuses on the terrorism angle. (MS)

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Terrorism and the Crash of KAL Flight 858: A Comparison of U.S. and South Korean Newspaper Coverage

By

Michael Salwen and Jung-Sook Lee

It is widely believed that the news media devote a great deal of coverage to terrorist events. Critics, who charge that the news media devote more coverage to terrorist events than perhaps such events deserve, point to the amount of coverage terrorist events receive in the news media (Maurer, 1985; Podhoretz, 1980; Wurth-Hough, 1983). But such events are real and inherently newsworthy, frequently dealing with unusual acts, deaths, destruction, and danger. Terrorist events may receive a good deal of media coverage because such events deserve the coverage.

This paper presents a case study of comparative international coverage of a terrorist event. We are aware of the limitations of a case study, but we will argue that this case study offers an opportunity to investigate the main question raised in this study. On November 29, 1987, KAL flight 858, originating in Yugoslavia to Abu Dhabi and bound for a stop in Bangkok before landing in its final destination, Seoul, South Korea, disappeared from radar in the vicinity of the Thai-Burma border. From the beginning, there were rumors in Seoul that the plane with 115 people aboard was hijacked or bombed and North Korea was responsible. There was no reason to blame North Korea other than its past behavior in numerous terrorist activities targeted against its southern neighbor (Rees, 1976;

Zasloff, 1983). The government's initial reluctance to report that the plane was missing only fueled the rumors.

Not until December 1 was evidence supporting terrorism in the crash of KAL flight 858 uncovered. Officials in Bahrain detained two people, an older man in his 50s or 60s and a woman in her mid-20s, for questioning after finding that they were traveling on false passports. It was discovered that they boarded KAL flight 858 in Yugoslavia and unboarded in Abu Dhabi. While alone before being questioned, they bit into poison caplets in their cigarettes. The man died. The woman survived and was eventually extradited to Seoul where she confessed to being an agent of North Korea who, with her companion, placed a time bomb on the plane. In a nationally televised confession, she said she took her orders directly from Kim Jong Il, the son of North Korea's charismatic leader, Kim il Sung.

The initial uncertainty regarding whether the crash was the result of a terrorist bombing presents the opportunity to examine how the press reported the terrorism angle before evidence supporting the charges of terrorism was uncovered, compared to after December 1, when the couple was arrested in Bahrain. This study compared U.S. and South Korean press coverage to investigate whether differences in reporting existed between the two nations.

Method

Stories dealing with the crash reported in four prestigious U.S. newspapers and two leading South Korean newspapers were examined from November 30 to December 3. The U.S. newspapers were The New York Times, The Washington Post, the Los Angeles Times, and the Chicago

Tribune. The South Korean newspapers were the conservative English language Korea Herald and the commercial Korean-language Hankook Ilbo.

The analysis focused on whether references were made to the terrorism angle. References to terrorism were coded as "direct" or "passing." A direct reference was defined as a reference to terrorism in the headline, the first (lead) paragraph of the story, or both. All other references were considered passing references. Since research suggests that readers can interpret journalistic "cues" of issue importance, such as prominent coverage in the headline or lead, a direct reference to the terrorism angle would suggest that the newspapers "played up" the terrorist angle (Shaw & McCombs, 1977).

Findings

The crash occurred too late to be reported in the November 30 South Korean newspapers. The first day's coverage of the crash in both The New York Times and The Washington Post made only passing reference to the terrorism angle deep inside the stories. The Los Angeles Times and the Chicago Tribune made no reference to the terrorism angle at all in their reports. Both the Los Angeles Times and Tribune used news service reports while the other newspapers relied on staff reports.

The New York Times placed its November 30 story on page nine. Not until the seventh paragraph did the story make reference to the terrorist angle, quoting a report in South Korea's state-owned television that the crash may have been the result of sabotage. In the very next paragraph, however, staff writer Susan Chira quoted an unnamed South Korean official who said the crash may have been the result of natural causes. The story concluded with references to the

arrest of a Japanese Red Army terrorist leader a week earlier in Tokyo with airline tickets to Seoul in his possession.

The November 30 story of the crash in the Post was carried on the front page. The 21-paragraph story did not make reference to the terrorist angle until the fourth paragraph, where the reference, attributed to the South Korean Foreign Minister, was cushioned as a "possibility that the aircraft was hijacked or otherwise targeted by terrorists."

Not surprisingly, the South Korean newspapers carried far more stories concerning the crash. The December 1 Hankook Ilbo carried 14 stories on the crash, two on the front page. Most of the stories inside the paper were "sidebars," dealing with aspects related to the crash, such as grieving relatives and the search for victims. Only three of the stories, however, made even passing reference to the terrorist angle.

Deep inside the page 1 banner headline story, KAL officials were quoted as mentioning the "possibility" of a terrorist bombing. An editorial on page 2 made passing reference to a possible terrorist angle, and a page-5 story entitled WHY DID IT CRASH. . . . KAL MYSTERY EXPERTS' THEORIES ABOUT CAUSE discussed numerous possibilities as to why the plane crashed, the terrorist angle among them. But even this analytical story, which offered the writer greater license to dwell on the possible terrorist angle than hard news stories, did not dwell on the terrorist angle. Greater emphasis was placed on the plane's past mechanical failures. This particular plane apparently had a history of mechanical problems.

The Korea Herald reported 13 stories dealing with the crash on December 1. The banner headline story was entitled KAL PLANE CRASHED ON THAI-BURMA BORDER; ALL 115 FEARED DEAD. The first eight paragraphs of the story made no reference to the terrorist angle. The cutline under the accompanying photograph of the plane noted that the plane had a history of mechanical problems. The ninth paragraph reported rampant "rumors" of a hijacking. The government's failure to report the crash, the newspaper asserted, was the cause of the rumors. Only in the last three paragraphs of the 23-paragraph story, which was jumped inside the newspaper, did the story report "speculation" of North Korean skulduggery.

The only other story in the December 1 issue of the Herald that made reference to the terrorism angle made a direct reference in a front-page story below the fold. The story, which carried the headline TERRORIST BOMB MAY HAVE CAUSED DISASTER; KAL OFFICALS, quoted KAL officials as saying that a bomb "may have been planted in the cockpit by terrorists hired by Communist North Korea or other terrorist groups."

On December 1, the U.S. newspapers gave more coverage to the possible terrorist angle. Three of the four newspapers sampled this day made direct reference to the terrorist angle. All the stories quoted the president of KAL, who publicly stated that he strongly suspected that a bomb planted by North Korean terrorists caused the crash.

The New York Times story quoted the president of KAL as saying that a terrorist's bomb was the "most likely" cause of the crash. The headline made no reference to terrorism. In the third paragraph, reporter Clyde Haberman reported that rumors of a terrorist bombing

were widespread throughout the nation, but he also noted in the same paragraph that the plane had a history of mechanical failures.

The Los Angeles Times used a news service report again on December 1. The Associated Press story that appeared on page 5 made direct reference to the terrorist angle in the headline: KOREAN JET STILL MISSING; AIRLINE SUSPECTS BOMB. Not until the eighth paragraph, however, did the story quote the airline's president as saying that the airline was "investigating the possibility" that a bomb destroyed the plane.

The December 1 Post made passing reference to the terrorist angle in its brief story, which was included in its world round-up section. The December 1 Chicago Tribune again relied on a news agency report. The story made direct reference to the terrorist angle. After it quoted the president, the next paragraph added that "his conclusion, however, appeared to be based on conjecture."

The reports of the crash in the U.S. and South Korean press examined in this study during November 30 and December 1, before the reports of the detention of the Asian couple in Bahrain, suggests that the press did not give the terrorist angle excessive coverage. On December 1, the U.S. newspapers did give the terrorist angle more coverage than the day before, even though the newspapers were aware of the widespread rumors of North Korean involvement the day before. The public remarks by the president of KAL apparently accounted for the increase in the amount of media coverage stressing the terrorist angle. But even this coverage of the terrorist angle was cushioned with caveats that the airline president's suspicion of North Korean involvement was only speculation. In addition, both the South Korean

and U.S. press suggested that the crash was more likely the result of mechanical failure than terrorism.

Not until December 2 did the stories in the South Korean and U.S. newspapers make consistently direct references to the terrorism angle. After this date, no more references to the plane's past mechanical failures appeared. The incident that changed the coverage was the detention and suicide and suicide attempt by the "mysterious Asian couple" in Bahrain, as the press referred to them.

All the U.S. newspapers made direct reference to the terrorist angle on December 2. All except the Tribune reported the story on page 1. For the third consecutive day the Tribune used a news agency report. The Los Angeles Times story, which commanded the top right corner, usually reserved for the most important story of the day, quoted numerous sources, each attributing the bombing to different groups -- North Korean agents, the Japanese Red Army terrorist organization, and Koreans living in Japan sympathetic to North Korea.

On December 2, President Chun Doo Hwan of South Korea publicly accused North Korea of bombing the plane through its agents. His remarks were reported in the press the next day. Chun charged that North Korea sabotaged the airplane to disrupt South Korea's presidential election scheduled for December 16, the nation's first direct presidential election in 16 years. He also claimed that North Korea bombed the plane to disrupt the Summer Olympic Games, scheduled to be held in Seoul in September.

All the U.S. newspapers reported Chun's remarks on December 3 and made direct references to the terrorism angle. Reporter Fred Hiatt of the Post sought to balance these accusations against North Korea by contacting the leader of Japan's Korean community loyal to North

Korea. Pak Che Ro, of the Chosoren organization, was quoted as saying that Roh Tae Woo, the South Korean ruling party's presidential candidate in the upcoming election, "planned the incident" to help his election chances by exploiting the anti-communist issue.

The Chicago Tribune finally carried a story from its own correspondent in Seoul on December 3. The story by Ronald Yates was pegged to the Olympic Games. The story raised questions regarding whether South Korea could guarentee safety during the Olympic Games.

The two South Korean newspapers examined in this study reported 56 stories dealing with the crash during December 2 and 3; too many to discuss individually. The crash was considered so important by the South Korean newspapers that stories of the upcoming election were frequently overshadowed.

The majority of these South Korean stories reported December 2 and 3, 57 percent, made direct reference to the terrorist angle. Another 27 percent made passing reference to the terrorist angle. The nine stories that made no reference to the crash were sidebar stories that dealt with such things as the grieving relatives and the continuing search for debris and bodies.

Table 1 reports the references to terrorism in stories appearing in the U.S. and South Korean press during November 30 and December 1, when there was no evidence to support North Korean terrorism, and December 2 and 3, when the press reported the detention and suicide and suicide attempt by the Asian couple in Bahrain. The chi-square statistic shows that there were proportionately more references to the

terrorism angle in the South Korean press after reports of couple's detention ($p < .001$). Though there were too few stories in the U.S. newspapers to compute meaningful statistical differences, the fact that all the stories reported in the U.S. press during December 2 and 3 made direct references to the terrorism angle suggests that the U.S. press also gave more coverage to the terrorism angle after evidence supporting terrorism was uncovered.

Table 1 About Here

Conclusion

The findings of this study did not suggest evidence for the belief that the press plays up or sensationalizes terrorist events. This study of a South Korean airline bombing, which, at the outset, involved rumors without evidence of North Korean terrorism, found that neither the South Korean or U.S. press gave much coverage to the terrorist angle until a major event was uncovered suggesting North Korean involvement. However, once evidence for North Korean terrorism was found, the press of both countries gave the terrorism angle a large amount of coverage.

This study suggested that public officials exercised at least a degree of "agenda control." In particular, the president of KAL was able to direct the press to devote more coverage to the terrorism angle by publicly commenting on the "possibility" of North Korean involvement in the crash. Though the press reported the president's remarks, it added that his comments were speculation and continued to report that the crash may have been the result of mechanical failure.

These findings regarding references to terrorism held for both the South Korean and U.S. press. The only difference between South Korean and U.S. coverage was, not surprisingly, in terms of quantity. The South Korean press reported far more stories about the crash.

Although this investigation involved a case study, it raised questions regarding whether the press devotes excessive coverage to terrorist events. What is "excessive" or "sensational" is subjective and leads to useless and interminable debates. This study, however, suggests that mere allegations or rumors of terrorism alone will not lead the press to report about terrorism in great detail. Some evidence is needed before the press focuses on the terrorism angle.

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Table 1

References to Terrorism in the U.S. and South Korean Press

South Korean Press

	November 30 to December 1	December 2 and 3	
Direct	n=1 3.7%	n=32 57.1%	
Passing	n=4 14.8%	n=15 26.8%	
None	n=22 81.5%	n=9 16.1%	
	n=27	n=56	N=83

$\chi^2 = 35.12$ df = 2 $p < .001$

U.S. Press

	November 30 to December 1	December 2 and 3	
Direct	n=3 37.5%	n=8 100%	
Passing	n=3 37.5%	n=0 0%	
None	n=2 25.0%	n=0 0%	
	n=8	n=8	N=16